

Message Text

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67

ACTION NEA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SCCT-01 SY-05 OPR-01 IO-10 A-01 AID-05

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CIAE-00 PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 SSO-00 /086 W

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P R 031720Z MAR 75

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3169

DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

USINT BAGHDAD UNN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 2837

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS LE

SUBJECT: RENEWAL OF CLASHES IN SIDON

REF: BEIRUT 2682

SUMMARY: RENEWED CLASHED BETWEEN LEBANESE ARMY AND "ARMED ELEMENTS" IN SIDON OVER WEEKEND HAVE CULMINATED IN ANOTHER TRUCE, BUT STRONG SUNNI MOSLEM AND LEFTIST PRESSURES ARE BEING BROUGHT TO BEAR ON PRIMIN SOLH AND HIS CABINET TO RESIGN. MEANWHILE, "NEGOTIATIONS" BETWEEN INSURGENTS (ON ONE HAND) AND GOL AND PLO LEADERSHIP (ON THE OTHER) HAVE BEEN RESUMED WITH VIEW TO RESOLVING (SOMEHOW) TENSE SITUATION THAT STILL PREVAILS IN SIDON. END SUMMARY.

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1. UNEASY TRUCE REPORTED REFTTEL BETWEEN LEB ARMY AND "ARMED

ELEMENTS" IN SIDON WAS SHATTERED APPROX 1700 LOCAL MAR 1, WHEN ARMY UNITS REENTERED TOWN TO REOPEN ARTERIAL NORTH-SOUTH COSTAL ROAD WHICH HAD BEEN CLOSED BY INSURGENTS IN AFTERMATH OF FEB 26 CLASHES (BEIRUT 2611). ACCORDING ARMY G-2, ARMY FORCED BARRICADES WHEN 1700 LOCAL DEADLINE FOR THEIR DISMANTLING PASSED WITH COMPLIANCE. ONE DETACHMENT WAS AMBUSHED AND SUFFERED CASUALTIES AS IT APPROACHED SIDON, AND ALTHOUGH ROAD WAS SUBSEQUENTLY REOPENED, TROOPS BECAME INVOLVED IN CONTINUOUS FIGHTING WITH INSURGENTS (ENCROACHING FROM OLD CITY LOCATED BETWEEN ROAD AND SEACOAST) UNTIL 1600 LOCAL MAR 2 WHEN SECOND TRUCE WAS ARRANGED.

2. WE UNDERSTAND FROM G-2 THAT DECISION TO IMPOSE AND ENFORCE MAR 1 DEADLINE WAS TAKEN BY PRES FRANGIE IN CONSULTATION WITH PRIMIN SOLH AND ARMY HIGH COMMAND. BETWEEN ORIGINAL FEB 27 TRUCE AND MAR 1 ACTION, ARMY GARRISON IN SIDON HAD BECOME PENNED UP IN ITS BARRACKS AND ROUTINE RESUPPLY--NOT ONLY OF SIDON GARRISON BUT BUT OF ALL ARMY UNITS IN SOUTH LEBANON--WAS IMPOSSIBLE BECAUSE COAST ROAD WAS BLOCKED BY INSURGENTS AND MOUNTAIN ROUTES TO BEKAA VALLEY IN EASTERN LEBANON WERE BLOCKED BY SNOW. FRANGIE'S DECISION TO FORCE COASTAL ROAD OPEN WAS THUS APPARENTLY MADE WITH FULL KNOWLEDGE OF PRIMIN SOLH, ONE OF WHOSE CABINET MINISTERS (MINECON ABBAS KHALAF) WAS ENGAGED IN "NEGOTIATIONS" WITH INSURGENTS THROUGHOUT MAR 1 UNTIL ARMY DEADLINE EXPIRED AND FIGHTING RESUMED.

3. RESULT OF MAR 1-2 STREET FIGHTING BETWEEN ARMY (EQUIPPED WITH TANKS, ARMORED CARS AND APCS) AND UNKNOWN NUMBER OF INSURGENTS (WHOSE ARSENAL INCLUDES RPG AND KATYUSHA ROCKETS, RECOILESS RIFLES AND 23MM SOVIET HEAVY MACHINE-GUNS) POSITIONED ON ROOFTOPS, WINDOWS AND IN ALLEYWAYS OF ISDON'S MEDIEVAL QUARTER WAS 5 DEAD AND 10 WOUNDED ON ARMY SIDE, PLUS SEVERAL ARMORED VEHICLES PUT OUT OF COMMISSION BY ROCKET FIRE. INSURGENT AND "LRVILIAN" CASUALTIES MORE DIFFICULT TO DEFINE, BUT MOST RELIABLE ESTIMATES PLACE THEM AT 10-15 DEAD AND AT LAEST 40 WOUNDED. ARMY G-2 IDENTIFIES INSURGENTS AS COMBINATION OF LEFTIST SIDONIAN CIVILIANS AND FEDAYEEN (PRIMARILY PFLP).

4. AT LAST REPORT, ARMY UNITS HAD AGAIN WITHDRAWN FROM SIDON UNDER TERMS OF TRUCE ARRANGED MAR 2, BUT THEIR POSITIONS HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY LEBANESE GENDARMES. COSTAL ROAD WAS OPEN ON MAR 3, CONFIDENTIAL

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BUT TRAFFIC ON IT AND ELSEWHERE IN DISON WAS BEING DIRECTED BY PERSONS WEARING CIVILIAN CLOTHES.

5. ABOVE DEVELOPMENTS HAVE SERVED TO HEIGHTEN ANTI-GOL AGITATION AND SENSE OF OUTRAGE AMONG LEBANESE LEFTIST AND SUNNI MOSLEM GROUPS. (SIDONIAN POPULATION IS PREDOMINANTLY SUNNITE, AND ITS LEFTIST GROUPS ARE THICK AS FLEAS WITH FEDAYEEN, ESPECIALLY LATTER'S MOST RADICAL ELEMENTS.) EVEN BEFORE FIGHTING

RESUMED MAR 1, PRIMIN SOLH HAD THROWN HENRI LAHOUD, GOVERNOR OF SOUTH LEBANON, TO WOLVES BY ANNOUNCING THAT HE HAD BEEN PLACED ON 20 DAYS "ADMINISTRATIVE LEAVE". AS RESULT OF LATEST CLASHES, LEFTISH AND SUNNI PRESSURES ON SOLH CABINET TO RESIGN HAVE MATERIALIZED, AND ONE SUNNI MINISTER (MALIK SALAM, MIN OF WATER AND ELECTRICITY) HAS SUBMITTED HIS RESIGNATION IN PROTEST AGAINST GOL'S FAILURE TO DISMISS GEN GHANEM FOR ARMY'S "UNILATERAL ACTION" IN REENTERING SIDON ON MAR 1. (GENERAL SUNNI COMPLAINT-- WHICH IS FALSE BUT WHICH PRIMIN SOLH HAS DONE NOTHING TO DENY-- IS THAT ARMY MOVED ON ITS OWN INITIATIVE AND WITHOUT CONSULTING GOL.) MINECONOMY ABBAS KHALAF REPORTEDLY ALSO WANTS TO RESIGN, BUT HIS PARTY BOSS KAMAL JUMBLATT HAS THUS FAR BEEN COOPERATING WITH PRES FRANGIE IN TRYING TO RESTORE ORDER AND IS PREVENTING KHALAF FROM QUITTING.

6. "NEGOTIATIONS" BETWEEN SIDON INSURGENTS ON ONE HAND AND COMBINED TEAM OF GOL MINISTERS AND PLO NOTABLES (ABU ZA'IM AND ZUHAYR MUHSEN) ON THE OTHER RESUMED ON EVENING OF MAR 2, AND HOPE IS THAT THIS WILL AT LEAST ALLOW TIME FOR TEMPER TO COOL AND ENABLE GOL-PLO TEAM TO PERSUADE "ARMED ELEMENTS" TO VACATE ROOFTOPS AND OTHER STRATEGIC POINTS WHICH THEY CONTINUE TO OCCUPY IN SIDON. IN MEANTIME, TOWN REMAINS CONTROLLED BY INSURGENTS; TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS WITH IT ARE STILL CUT; LEFTIST, SUNNI AND OTHER "OPPOSITIONIST" AGITATION AGAINST GOL CONTINUES; AND PRIMIN SOLH REMAINS INSISTENT THAT NO RPT NO FEDAYEEN HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN THE ENTIRE AFFAIR.

7. COMMENT: (A) SOLH'S POSITION IS ADMITTEDLY DIFFICULT, CAUGHT AS HE IS BETWEEN (A) HIS OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO ENFORCE LAW AND ORDER AND (B) HIS DESIRE NOT TO LOSE CREDIBILITY WITH LEBANON'S SUNNI COMMUNITY AND LEFTIST FORCES AND TO PRESERVE FICTION OF FEDAYEEN NON-INVOLVEMENT. WHOLE BUSINESS POINTS UP ONCE AGAIN HOW DIFFICULT IT IS FOR ANY LEBANESE SUNNI POLITICAL

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LEADER TO ACT WITH PURPOSE AND DETERMINATION IN DEALING WITH TROUBLESOME SITUATIONS RESULTING FROM STRONG ATTACHMENT ON PART OF HIS CO-RELIGIONISTS TO SECTARIAN AND NON-LEBANESE (I.E., EXTREMIST FEDAYEEN) CAUSES. NEXT FEW DAYS WILL TELL WHETHER SOLH GOVT CAN SURVIVE FUROR AND TENSIONS CREATED BY SIDON CLASHES, AND ALSO WHETHER SITUATION WHICH PRODUCED THOSE CLASHES CAN BE RESOLVED WITHOUT FURTHER FIGHTING.

(B) IN MEANTIME, FISHERMEN WHOSE COMPLAINT WAS OSTENSIBLE CAUSE OF THIS ENTIRE ESPISODE HAVE BEEN LARGELY FORGOTTEN, EXCEPT FOR PURPOSES OF CONTINUING LEFTIST AGITATION. (MYSTERIOUS BOMB-BLAST WHICH DESTROYED BEIRUT OFFICE OF CAMILLE CHAMOUN'S FISHING COMPANY NIGHT OF FEB 28 HAS BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO FISHERMEN, BUT THERE LITTLE DOUBT THAT IT WAS PERPETRATED BY RADICAL LEFTISTS.) ALL THIS TENDS REINFORCE OUR INITIAL SUSPICION (PARA 3 BEIRUT 2611) THAT

SIDON CLASHES RESULTED FROM DELIBERATE ATTEMPT BY FEDAYEEN
"REJECTIONIST" ELEMENTS AND THEIR LOCAL LEFTIST ALLIES TO CAUSE
COMMOTION ON EVE OF SECRETARY KISSINGER'S RETURN TO ME AND TO EMBROIL
FEDAYEEN LEADERSHIP WITH LEBANESE ARMY AND GOL. FACT THAT LATER
OBJECTIVE HAS NOT BEEN ATTAINED IS PROBABLY THE ONLY PLUS TO EMERGE
OUT OF THIS WHOLE SAD AFFAIR.
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